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SUBJECT: SENATE PRESIDENT KENGO'S OUVERTURES TO THE U.S. - WHAT'S THE OLD FOX UP TO NOW?

REF: 09 KINSHASA 1144; 10 ADDIS ABABA 59

CLASSIFIED BY: William J Garvelink, Ambassador, STATE, EXEC; REASON:  
1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Senate President Kengo wa Dondo has unexpectedly approached United States diplomats, in Kinshasa and at the AU in Addis Ababa (reftels), to request assistance in facilitating meetings with senior USG officials during an upcoming trip to Washington. One of the Congo's most astute politicians, Kengo is the only oppositionist to hold a senior position in the GDRC. We suspect he may be testing the waters to see if the U.S. will support him in connection with a possible run for the presidency in ¶2011. We recommend that Department not arrange meetings for Kengo without the knowledge of the DRC embassy in Washington (which Kengo does not want) as Kengo may wish to embarrass Kabila, or even the U.S. Although possibly discredited by his long association with late dictator Mobutu Sese Seko and handicapped by his ethnic background (European father and Rwandan Tutsi mother), Kengo may eye an historic opportunity to lead the dispirited, rudderless opposition lest the increasingly unpopular Kabila wins the 2011 race by default. We are skeptical Kengo will capture voters' imagination in 2011 but Congolese politics is nothing if not unpredictable. End summary.

On a "discreet mission" to the U.S.

¶2. (C) Kengo wa Dondo, president of the national senate and the only senior GDRC official who is not a member of Joseph Kabila's ruling coalition, has approached the U.S. twice in recent weeks, once at a meeting he requested with the ambassador (ref a) and, just two weeks later, at the AU in Addis Ababa with the acting DCM (ref b). On both occasions he requested our assistance in facilitating meetings with USG officials during an upcoming trip to Washington. He emphasized at both meetings that his U.S. mission was to be carried out in utmost discretion, requesting specifically to the ambassador in Kinshasa that no local employees learn that the embassy would issue him and his staff visas.

¶3. (SBU) Born Leon Lubicz in 1935 in Equateur Province, Kengo is the son of a Polish Jewish father, who abandoned his family when Kengo was a child, and a Tutsi mother of Rwandan origin. Lubicz changed his name to Kengo wa Dondo in the early 1970's pursuant to the Mobutu dictatorship's push towards the "Zairianization" of

names. Kengo was a Mobutu protégé for many years, serving as prime minister on three occasions: from 1982-86; from 1988-90; and from 1996 until Mobutu's departure from Zaire in 1997. Although Kengo distanced himself from Mobutu during the dictator's twilight years in power, many Congolese still think of him as a "Mobutiste." An advocate of free-market economics, Kengo was a leading interlocutor between the Government of Zaire and the international financial institutions during his stints in office. No stranger to corruption, Kengo was charged with money-laundering by the Government of Belgium in 2003. The charges appear to have been dropped as Kengo travels to Belgium frequently where he has a home and economic interests.

¶4. (SBU) Kengo left Zaire for Belgium when Laurent Kabila assumed office 1997 but returned shortly afterwards. He supported Jean-Pierre Bemba, who is also from Equateur, for President in 2006 against Kabila but never joined Bemba's political movement. In January, 2007 Kengo was elected to the senate from Equateur. He ran for the senate presidency as an independent shortly afterwards and won a surprising victory over Leonard She Okitundu, the candidate of the presidential coalition (Alliance de la Majorite Presidentielle or "ANP"). Many observers believe Kabila initially wanted to prevent Kengo from taking office but reluctantly agreed to accept him as senate president after the two agreed on ground rules for cooperation. Kengo has been a force for moderation and compromise as senate president and reportedly has good professional - if not friendly - relations with Kabila.

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What is Kengo up to?

¶5. (C) We suspect that Kengo's main purpose in going to Washington is to test the waters to see if the U.S. would support him should he decide to run against President Joseph Kabila in 2011 elections. He undoubtedly understands the opportunity before him as Kabila's term nears completion: Kabila is increasingly unpopular with the populace except, perhaps, in his stronghold of Katanga, while the leaderless opposition is still headed officially by Jean-Pierre Bemba, who has been in jail in The Hague since May, 2008 when he was arrested on ICC charges of crimes against humanity.

¶6. (C) In short, although possibly discredited by his many years of association with Mobutu, Kengo may be trying to fill a void that few other Congolese politicians can fill: he has name recognition, he can count on some "native-son" support from the DRC's Lingala-speaking western provinces, and he hopes to get backing from the international community, particularly the EU and the U.S., based on his long-standing support for free-market economics and contacts with the IFI's. He might even succeed in overcoming many personal disadvantages, including his advanced age (he will be 76 when the elections take place and 81 when his five-year term ends in 2016) and his ethnic heritage. (Note: Persons of mixed European-African heritage - "les métis" - are generally distrusted here and Kengo's Rwandan Tutsi heritage is particularly unsettling to many Congolese because of perceived Rwandan aggression against the DRC during the Congo wars. End note.) Nonetheless, we do not foresee Kengo's candidacy capturing the imagination of the populace, although a successful Kengo run for the presidency cannot be ruled out.

¶7. (C) Comment: Kengo asked us and USAU to maintain strict confidentiality regarding his upcoming visit, now scheduled for mid-February, for reasons unspecified. We recommend that the Department refrain from making such visits without informing the Congolese embassy in Washington. Kengo may wish to embarrass Kabila by showing that he has American "support." But he may also want to claim we offered to help him if word gets out he is maneuvering for international support to challenge Kabila. End

comment.  
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